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LETTER DATED 23 SEPTEMBER 1998 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SUDAN TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Further to my letter dated 22 September 1998 (S/1998/885), I have the honour to attach herewith an editorial published in The New York Times of 23 September 1998 on the American attack against Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan last month.

The paper stated that the Central Intelligence Agency had recently concluded that reports that had appeared to document a clear link between the Sudanese Government and terrorist activities were fabricated and unreliable.

I should be grateful if you could circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Elfatih ERWA
Permanent Representative

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Annex

Editorial published in The New York Times of 23 September 1998

Dubious Decisions on the Sudan

Almost immediately after American missiles destroyed the Shifa pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan last month, serious questions arose about whether the Clinton Administration had targeted the right factory. The Administration insisted that the factory was producing nerve gas for terrorists. But a report in Monday's Times by Tim Weiner and James Risen reveals that the decision to attack the plant was based in part on incomplete information and inference.

The Administration argues that it nevertheless had enough to go on to justify the attack. But the launching of deadly American missiles requires more solid and convincing evidence than Washington appears to have had in this case.

The crucial decisions leading up to the attack were made by a narrow group of top national security officials meeting alone. Knowledgeable staff members were excluded to assure secrecy. With America's Embassy in Khartoum closed, up-to-date information was scarce. Hard proof linking the Shifa factory to terrorism and nerve gas production was elusive, and the indirect evidence that was available was incomplete and open to conflicting interpretations. In addition, the Central Intelligence Agency had recently concluded that reports that had appeared to document a clear link between the Sudanese Government and terrorist activities were fabricated and unreliable.

Soon after the Aug. 20 missile attack, the Administration was compelled to retreat from its claims that the Shifa factory had been directly financed by Osama bin Laden, the alleged terrorist linked to the deadly attacks on two American Embassies in Africa. Washington still insists that soil samples in American possession conclusively prove that an early stage of nerve gas production was taking place at the plant. But Western scientists who recently worked at the plant insist they knew of no nerve gas work.

Instead, they say, Shifa was the Sudan's main source of locally needed agricultural chemicals and veterinary medicines. Whether or not it turns out that the United States destroyed the Shifa plant in error, Washington should offer to replace any lost production of agricultural and veterinary products from the plant. It does not help the war against terrorism to hurt innocent civilians.

Washington's nerve gas allegations may well be correct. But the record badly needs to be clarified. Wrongly, the Administration has resisted calls for independent verification of soil samples from the plant. It should agree to such review.

The United States is entitled to use military force to protect itself against terrorism. But the case for every such action must be rigorously established. In the case of the Sudan, Washington has conspicuously failed to prove its case.